

REMARKS ON NORMAN SARACENIC  
ARCHITECTURE

IN THE ISLAND OF SICILY.

"Europe is the glory of the earth, Italy the glory of Europe, Sicily the glory of Italy, and the country seen from hence, the glory of Sicily."

Such are the sentiments displayed in an inscription on the stones of the terrace of the Saracenic palace of La Zisa, at Palermo; and few travellers to this spot fail to concur in the truth of the last of these comparisons. It is impossible to describe the rich and glorious scenery, or convey an adequate notion of the heavenly climate, of this island gem, dropped into the Mediterranean, between Europe and Africa, as a pearl out of the diadem of nature. The country teems with the best and richest gifts of Providence; but, like everything beautiful, the possession of which is always coveted, it has experienced numberless vicissitudes. At various times it has fallen into the possession of different people, envying the advantages enjoyed by their predecessors; and monuments still remaining, stand prominently forward as so many hoary witnesses of the despotic masters who have swayed in succession the sceptre in this land.

A knowledge of the events which have chiefly affected the condition of any country is indispensable in the study of its architecture. The character, habits, and religious feelings of a people, are strongly indicated by their public and domestic edifices. Every nation, as it has arisen out of insignificance, has adopted in its buildings some peculiarity of style and construction; and no revolution has occurred, by which the ruling dynasty of any country has been changed, which has not been attended by some architectural transitions more or less distinctive and scientific. As preliminary to the remarks we have to make on the Norman edifices in Sicily, we shall therefore venture to survey some of the most important features connected with the history of the island.

From time to time various powers have invaded this small earth with remarkable interest; leaving, scattered throughout the country, evidence of their existence and ascendancy. A familiar acquaintance with the rise, progress, and fall of each of these powers will materially assist our present inquiry.

During the heroic ages, the fierce and cruel Lustrigones possessed Sicily; the Sicani from Spain followed, who in turn yielded to the Italian Siculi: Trojans, Candiotes, and Cretans, subsequently arrived in the island; and between two and three centuries after, as nearly as we can ascertain from the imperfect chronology of those remote ages, when the Greeks continued to migrate in colonies, the country fell into the hands of this enterprising people. The Romans, no less successful in their day, subsequently obtained possession, and after subjugating the inhabitants, annexed the island to their vast dominions. Under this new rule it continued without interruption, until the time of Justinian, when at the division of the empire it fell to the lot of the eastern emperors: but being at this time invaded and seized by the Goths, it remained subject to their power during an interval of seventeen years, at the expiration of which the island was recovered by the progress of Belisarius.

The Sicilians, however, were not destined to remain long under the rule of the Greek emperors. The progress of time had been developing, with unusual rapidity, a power of extraordinary magnitude. Different parts of Europe had already been invaded by the Saracens, whose attention was at length turned to Sicily. After a siege of considerable duration, these people completed the conquest of the island in A.D. 830. A fleet, issuing from Kairouan, probably the Cyrene of the Romans, a city fifty miles south-east of Tunis, assailed the country, under the command of Asad; and the descendant of these Saracenic conquerors maintained their ground in the island during a period somewhat exceeding two centuries.

The events connected with this invasion are of a curious and interesting nature. At the commencement of the ninth century Sicily became agitated by various troubles, which eventually produced the overthrow of the imperial power in the island. Ebn-el-Kattib, the Arabian historian, has given in his chronicles an interesting account of this important revolution.

The emperor of the east, he tells us, had bestowed the government of Sicily upon Con-

stantine Patrie. Phima, the governor's general, a bold ambitious man, of a marauding disposition, consonant with the character of the times, took occasion to ravage the coast of Africa. Employing some vessels of his master, it was surmised, with some appearance of truth, that he engaged in the enterprise at the instance of Constantine himself. The emperor, hearing of this disloyal expedition, despatched orders to the Sicilian governor for the immediate dismissal of the general. Phima, hearing of this command, and entertaining a suspicion that he might be surrendered to the emperor's displeasure, returned with all speed to Syracuse, where, seizing upon the city and subduing Constantine, he proclaimed himself king. He had not been long in possession of the island, before a rebellion awaited him for his treachery. Returning to his old pursuits for the gratification of his predatory habits, he left Sicily for a time, having placed the government in the hands of one Phais, a soldier, who had served with him in various expeditions, and had obtained a place in his confidence. But in his absence the deputy revolted, and he had himself to repine as a victim to perjury, not a little resembling the treason by which his own master had been overthrown. In such a strait, subdued and driven from Sicily, but with a spirit still unconquered, Phima addressed himself to the Saracens. He implored and gained the assistance of Ziadeh Allah, the king of Kairouan. This sovereign supplied him with a hundred vessels, which, in addition to those he possessed, formed a fleet of a sufficiently formidable character to terrify the rebellious Sicilians into submission. The Saracens, however, had their own course of policy to pursue, and Phima, to his surprise and dismay, was not permitted to lead the armament, which he supposed was to place him on the throne of Sicily. To Asad, the son of Parath, a Saracen, was committed the sole management of the expedition. Ten thousand infantry and seven hundred horse composed the whole force.

Landing at Mazzara, in A.D. 828, the Musselmans gave battle to Phais, near the city. After a short but obstinate resistance, the renegade was overthrown. Seeing no prospect of redeeming his fortunes, he fled at once to Calabria: but his career soon drew to a close; he was pursued, overtaken, and slain. Asad, the general of the expedition, had been killed at the commencement of the siege; and Phima, in support of whose rights the armament invaded Sicily, appears to have been altogether forgotten.

Mohammed, the son of Aboul Dgiouari, succeeded Asad in the command, and laid siege to Syracuse. The news of the Sicilian revolt had reached the eastern capital, and the emperor resolved on sending an armament to reduce the power of the Saracens, and regain possession of the island. When the preparations were fully made, the force left Constantinople, and arriving in Sicily gave battle to the Musselmans, and succeeded in relieving Syracuse, the siege of which was immediately raised. The Saracen army was not sufficiently powerful to cope with that from Constantinople, and retired into different parts of the island, forming into several detachments. From this time commenced a desultory warfare, the Saracens fighting obstinately in their intrenchments. The besiegers were usually victorious in the numerous engagements which took place. On several occasions the Saracens were reduced to the greatest straits through hunger; and so hopeless appeared to be their condition, that day by day their assailants expected to receive overtures of peace, which, by anticipation, they resolved to grant only on the terms of total submission and immediate evacuation of the island. But the turbaned soldiery, resolute in their severest extremities, continued to harass their opponents, and to wear that confident appearance which shewed they had not wholly relinquished their hopes of final success. Measures had been adopted, as soon as they discovered the superiority of the Constantinopolitan armament, to procure a reinforcement of their own troops. An embassy had been despatched to Spain and Kairouan, and they were no less surprised than disappointed that assistance had not already arrived. At length the day for their deliverance drew near. Asad, the son of Vakil, with whose name a hundred victories were

associated, came to their succour. New life and courage were infused into the Saracenic arms. Supplies poured in from Africa; and, in a short period, their condition, which appeared one of hopelessness, was converted first into success, and ultimately into security and peace. Asad arrived in A.D. 830, at which time Ziadeh Allah was nominally the governor of the island. When the peace was confirmed, the administration of affairs was delivered into the hands of Mohammed, a descendant of the Aglabite dynasty. Mohammed assumed the title of king of Sicily, decessing after a reign of nineteen years, about A.D. 850. By his establishment on the throne came the island under the dominion of the Saracenic branch of the Aglabite sovereigns, who succeeded in establishing themselves during a long period. The Phatimites princes followed, Sicily falling into their possession, after they had wrested from the Aglabites the government of the Saracenic empire in Africa.

The uninterrupted occupation of Sicily by the Saracens, during a period exceeding two centuries, gave sufficient opportunity for the encouragement of the arts of peace. Stately buildings, palaces, and mosques arose in different parts of the island, distinguished by the novel features and appointments which were employed in their erections in other countries. Their taste and invention were expended chiefly in the construction of intricate and complex ornament, and in fantastic arrangements, not unfrequently exhibiting marks of singular, though peculiar ingenuity. The symmetry, unity, and nobility of a classical edifice was rarely discoverable; but there was no neglect in the proper adaptation of materials, in the selection of sites, and the contrivance of plans, all of which seem manifestly to have been regulated by the peculiar wants and habits of the people. In some measure only do we observe modifications of their usual style, which is sufficiently accounted for in their employment of the remains of Roman edifices.

The Normans gained possession of Sicily after numerous adventurous exploits, and may be said to have completed their conquest of the whole island in A.D. 1071, although they had acquired superiority in many parts of the island since A.D. 1043. The reader will find a detailed account of their invasion in a work on Sicily by the late Mr. Gally Knight. According to the authority of Leo Gusiensis, Drogo, a Norman chief, on his return from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, landed at Salerno, in Italy, with about forty companions, in A.D. 1016; and his entrance into this part of Italy subsequently led to the capture and occupation of Sicily by his countrymen.

The Saracens, in their piratical expeditions, made frequent incursions on the coast of Italy, and at times attacked the Salernitans. On one occasion the Normans, who had just arrived, and were enjoying the hospitality of the Duke of Salerno, flew to arms, under the direction of their leader, attacked the marauding invaders with complete success, and drove them from the town and neighbouring territory. Grateful for such timely assistance, and struck with the prowess of the strangers, the duke pressed them to remain in his dominions, offering to maintain them honourably as auxiliaries. The pilgrims excused themselves at that time, promising, however, to return. In the following spring, with a band much augmented, Drogo retraced his steps to Italy, and entered the service of the Duke of Salerno. The bold adventurers as they came, declaring to fulfil their stipendiary engagement with this Italian prince, nevertheless inspired such awe, as gave rise to suspicions of the gravest nature. The duke feared that the day might come when he should have to reproach himself for the haste with which he had invited the Normans to his dominions; and his anticipations were not long in being confirmed.

During the first ten years, as the number of Normans increased, they gradually laid aside their stipendiary character. Banding themselves together into lawless companies of freebooters, they at length became the most furious and uncontrolled pillagers of Italy. Their growing power began to alarm many of the petty independent states; and the Prince of Capua, whom they threatened, either to appease their desire or gain their interests, ceded to them a district between Capua and Naples. Here they built the town of Aversa, on the site of the ancient Atella. Thus they obtained